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CONTINGENCY, EDUCATION, AND THE NEED FOR REASSURANCE

ABSTRACT. This short paper is a response to Richard Smith’s ‘Abstraction and finitude: education, chance and democracy’. In his paper Smith contends that a rationalist agenda dominates education and democracy today, and that this agenda by rendering us insensitive to the tragic dimension of life, breeds a sense of hubris, or arrogance towards fate which is fuelled by an inordinate confidence in our knowledge. In the worlds of education and politics it has led to an obsession with management and transparency, and to students who fear to take risks. As a specific example of this, he takes up the recent fixation in universities with learning how to learn, which he says leads to an over-emphasis on skills in the curriculum, and to an ‘audit’ culture. While sympathising with much of his analysis of the latter, my counter-suggestion is that the contemporary world lacks anything but a sense of the contingency of things, to the contrary, that at the heart of its manageralist culture and its performatist ethos lies the need for reassurance. My response focuses on the politics of the self-directed learner that lies at the heart of the lifelong learning literature, on learning how to learn, on the notion of transparency and on the transparent society, and on the politics of contingency and scepticism.

KEY WORDS: contingency, democracy, lifelong learning, performativity/managerialism, reassurance, scepticism, self-directed learning, transparent society

Richard Smith complains about ‘a kind of knowingness’ that has, he says, ‘come to take over education.’ (p. 5) ‘Knowingness’ is a term he explains in the paper’s first section through his reading of Sophocles’s tragedy Oedipus Rex where he ties it to the kind of arrogance towards fate which the Greeks named hubris. Hubris comes from

excessive self-confidence in one’s reading of the world that engenders the illusion of complete mastery of one’s own destiny. Oedipus is an example of that kind of self-confidence ending in tragedy. Smith detects the same self-confidence in western societies today expressed in our ‘ruinous tendency to rationalise, to rely on reason over-much and in contexts where reason has little place.’ (p. 3) In his paper Smith suggests two such contexts for this tendency; those of education and democracy. What fuels our rationalist agenda in both contexts, he says, is the search for certainty and perfection; our conviction that knowledge is within our grasp and that the path to personal perfection lies through self-knowledge. This conviction, he contends, blinds us to the tragic dimension of life; to the extent to which we are at the mercy of fate and the whims of the gods, to the fact of our finitude, a dimension familiar to the classical Greeks. Like Oedipus we are blinded by confidence in our own cleverness and are insensitive towards the contingency of things, the basic uncertainty of the world, in the way we understand education and politics. Oedipus paid dearly for his stupidity, the implication is that we will also pay dearly for ours.

Smith continues thus: ‘It seems,’ he says, ‘it is not enough to know, in many of the educational systems of the west: we are also to know that we know.’ (p. 5 my italics) This need to know that we know, however, denotes a need for reassurance that we do know that seems at odds with the ‘culture of knowingness’, contrary to the blind confidence in one’s knowledge that is typical of knowingness, and consonant rather with self-doubt. Oedipus’s arrogance towards fate and the gods came from his failure to feel the need for reassurance that would have made him sensitive to his human frailty and more cautious about conducting his affairs. A sense of the contingency of things would have raised in him the need for reassurance, for prudence. But a modern day Oedipus could hardly be insensitive to this need for reassurance in a world marked by constant and swift change promoted by the creation of ever-new knowledge and technologies, for that world is one of impermanence and risk (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994) where the contingency of things is continuously forced on our very experience. So that, given this situation, Smith’s claim that our contemporary society lacks a sense of the contingent or uncertain seems problematic, but not necessarily so his account of our self-confidence. My own reading of that situation is that what lies at the heart of our obsession with management and transparency is a fear of